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**Marxism & Culture**

## **The new opium?**

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EVERY SO OFTEN someone raises the question of why socialist papers like **Socialist Worker** and **Socialist Worker Review** do not carry more on 'culture'. Unfortunately, it is often a misdirected question. For those who put it have rarely thought through what is meant by 'culture' and what socialist activity in this field can achieve.

What is culture?

There is a sense in which it is something which is not separable from life as a whole. For it is the totality of the ideas, language, attitudes and ways of seeing the world which guide people's behaviour in any society.

The criticism of culture is then the criticism of social life as a whole.

But there is also a narrower sense in which the word is used. In any society there are people who display an ability to tell stories, make songs and poems, to create artefacts, which get a response from their fellows.

There is a close relation between culture in this narrow definition, meaning popular art, and culture in the wider sense. People listen to stories, like songs, admire paintings or laugh at jokes because these relate in some way or other to their everyday lives. The story holds their attention because its elements provide a heightened representation of their own fears and hopes; the poem or song expresses feelings which they cannot express themselves; the joke is funny because it pushes aspects of normal life to the point at which they appear ludicrous.

But popular art does not simply express people's wider experiences. It also influences how they react to these: stories, songs, poems or jokes help shape the frameworks through which they interpret their interaction with each other and with the natural world. It is a determinant of the 'common sense' which guides the behaviour of the mass of people in any society.

Control over this 'common sense' is a vital part of any ruling class defence. It has to attempt to find mechanisms which can incorporate certain elements in popular art and ban others. In feudal society the church hierarchy continually strove to integrate popular festivals into a religious framework which could control them. The rise of capitalism was accompanied by a conscious attempt by the puritan protagonists of the new social order to restructure, and if necessary to stamp out, old forms of popular entertainment. And in mature capitalism the control is pushed to its utmost limit, with a specialised sector of the economy producing 'popular culture' (radio, TV, film,

newspapers and magazines, pop music, sport) in just the same way that other commodities are produced.

There is always some degree of contradiction involved in such attempts at control. You cannot shape people's experiences unless you relate to them. And in a class society, some of those experiences are of greater or lesser degrees of class struggle. The medieval Catholic church had to relate to the feeling of impoverishment and oppression of the mass of peasants if it was to explain to them that such poverty and oppression was part of heaven's plan. The modern day popular newspaper has to talk about strikes and protests if it is to condemn them. Popular culture is always a combination of contradictory elements – of people's immediately lived experience of life in class society on the one hand, and of a general set of ideas which justify existing society on the other. The ablest practitioners of popular arts are those most able to deal with this contradictory situation.

It is not only the popular art of the masses that has to face up to such problems. So does that of the ruling class. Its members too need to be bolstered up by ideological certainty, by an account of society that justifies their role to themselves, by an art that soothes over the painful dilemmas they face.

Any successful ruling class attempts, by patronage, to draw to itself the ablest artists. This accomplishes three tasks for it: it provides itself with the best, most aesthetically satisfying or most entertaining art; it enables it to feel that it itself is the guardian of all civilised values; and it provides a mechanism for ensuring that the ablest practitioners of popular art see that their own advance depends upon not challenging the ruling ideology.

Ideology in general is always propagated by a hierarchy of practitioners. At the most popular level there are those who repeat as truisms isolated fragments of the ruling ideology

(‘there will always be rulers’, ‘human nature means things cannot be different’, ‘the wealthy provide work for the mass of us’, and so on). Above those there are the low level professionals who are continually putting across such ideas in newspapers, on TV programmes or through the educational system. Finally, at the highest level there are the ‘intellectuals’ proper, whose ‘learned’ discussions in books, articles and lecture halls justify the arguments put across by those below.

The same hierarchy operates within the arts. There is ‘high art’, popular art and the culture of ordinary life.

The relationship between the three is not as simple as that in other areas of ideology.

On the one hand, the high degree of division of labour in an advanced capitalist society means that high art can become so specialised as hardly to relate at all to popular art: while the books of the right wing philosophy professor, Roger Scruton can act as a reference point for the **Sun**’s most rabid political columnists, the works of a composer like Stockhausen hardly do the same for its popular music columnists.

On the other, the need of art to give expressions to the contradictions within people’s lives means that even art aimed mainly at the upper classes can challenge certain aspects of existing society.

There are important consequences for revolutionary socialists from this hierarchical structuring of art.

First, most of the time the sheer scale of resources at the disposal of the ruling class compared with those on our side mean that the ruling class have no great difficulty in pulling the great majority of practitioners of popular culture into their orbit. Again and again, young writers, musicians, playwrights or comedians emerge who put across a message

of defiant hostility to the *status quo*, only to 'mature' into tame entertainers and artists for it.

This is not only because the ruling class controls the funds which alone can enable people to have the time to specialise in artistic production or because it controls the means by which they can find expression (the TV channels, film studios or publishing houses). It is also because in a society which is not in a state of pre-revolutionary ferment, most people take the main structures of ruling class power for granted and art which is going to be popular is art which does the same.

It is only when there is a great upsurge of class struggle that there is any great pull upon the mass of artists to move in a different direction – as was seen in 1917 and, on a much smaller scale, in 1968 in France or during the miners' strike.

It is complete voluntarist nonsense for socialists to imagine that on the terrain of a long drawn out defensive struggle by the working class (a war of attrition, or what Gramsci called 'a war of positions') we can somehow match the ruling class's resources by our own efforts and counter their domination in the field of popular culture.

Of course, particular socialist artists will do their best to wage their little bit of the struggle. They will try to attract other artists to what they are doing. But they will also have to recognise that until the working class as a whole makes a massive move forward, their own efforts will hardly make more than a dent in the defences of the other side. And even the dent they make will reflect the limitations of the defensive war of attrition; they will find it much easier to give expression to the horrors of existing society than to the idea that working class self activity is the answer to these.

Most of us are not artists. We are socialists Who have to argue with people influenced by existing popular culture (and with the prejudices and stereotypes which it implants

in our own consciousnesses). The best that **Socialist Worker** and **Socialist Worker Review** can do is to help us in this task.

Here the most important thing will usually be stringent examination and criticism of things that popular culture expects us to take for granted. This means, for instance, looking at the covert assumptions that lie behind the representation of people's lives in soap operas, pointing out the hidden (often very reactionary) message of some of the most popular films or pop songs, being iconoclastic towards the most fashionable trends in comedy or music.

The point is not that we can win the battle against the mystifying effects of popular culture. Today it fulfils some of the tasks which religion played in the days of the young Marx. And, as he insisted, the only way to challenge such mystification completely was to challenge in practice the society that produced it. However, such considerations did not lead Marx to drop his atheism and join the church, nor should they lead socialists today to drop a critical attitude towards most of the products of popular culture and to join in its fan clubs.

The second consequence of the hierarchical structuring of art concerns our attitude to certain 'high art'.

This, by definition, is usually art which is well out of the reach of the great mass of workers. Bourgeois society provides them with neither the time nor the education to partake in it. From that it is easy to draw the conclusion that it is an elite product that we should not have anything to do with.

Again and again people say the socialist press should not deal with films that are only shown at art cinemas, with serious novels or with Channel Four programmes. Why talk about Tolstoy, the argument goes, when most people are watching Tottenham?

The argument is wrong – and not just because only three per cent of adults go to football matches as opposed to more than 50 per cent who read books (according to **Social Trends, 1986**). Much more importantly, the best of ‘high’ art attempts to provide an overall expression of the society in which we live. It can deepen your insight into that society and into the problems of people who live in it.

This by no means applies to all ‘high art’. Much of it is self-indulgent crap, expressing no more than a mystified view of bourgeois angst. But some of it is much more than this.

For instance, when the bourgeoisie was struggling against the old feudal order, much of the art provided an insight into the clash of great social forces which still remains fascinating today. This is true of the plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Walter Scott, Stendhal or Balzac, and the music of Beethoven.

Or again, look at some of the novels produced in the 1920s and 1930s, when even whole sections of the bourgeoisie felt existing society was slipping into barbarism. The best writings of Dos Passos, of Dreisser, of Malraux, of Sartre, of Silone, of Steinbeck, of James T. Farrell, all attempted to come to terms with this state of affairs and in doing so provided insights which any socialist can still benefit from.

A rounded revolutionary socialist is not one who will simply dismiss out of hand such advances in understanding. He or she will, in principle, want to gain access to them, even if in practice time and other commitments do not make this possible.

This does not mean, let me hasten to add, that socialists adopt a school teacherish, superior attitude to other workers. We are not in the business of telling them they are ignorant because they have not read certain books. But it does mean that we encourage people to read rather than not

to read, that we reject any form of workerist philistinism which rejoices in the denial to workers of the gains made by some bourgeois high art.

If we look at things in this way, we are in a position to see what publications like **Socialist Worker** and **Socialist Worker Review** can and cannot do.

We can attempt to puncture the various cultural fads and fashions, showing how they encourage people to take for granted things that should be questioned.

We can direct people to the most relevant and accessible bits of 'high culture'. This, for instance, has been what **Socialist Worker Review** has quite rightly done in the case of novelists with its *Writers Reviewed* series. It is what **Socialist Worker** occasionally does when it reviews an art cinema film or a Channel Four series.

Here very much the same considerations apply as in the putting across of socialist ideas. We have to begin, in **Socialist Worker** with those things which are most accessible for people who are new to socialist discussion and argument, and then move on in **Socialist Worker Review** to those that are more difficult.

Finally, we can give publicity to those few, socialist artists who try to go further with some sort of artistic representation of the contradictions of existing society.

But in all this we have to understand our achievements will be modest. Our criticism will leave the bulk of culture, whether 'popular' or 'high' untouched. We will only have the most marginal of successes when it comes to overcoming the way in which capitalist society cuts the mass of people off from the advances of 'high culture'. Our socialist artists will only make small advances on to the vast terrain occupied by the bourgeoisie.



It is nonsense to talk of creating a ‘counter-hegemonic’ culture under capitalism. We will never have the resources to do that this side of the socialist revolution. What we can do is aim at a much more limited goal – to build on those experiences of struggle which lead people to begin to envisage a different sort of society. Such building involves challenging all the ideological presuppositions of existing society, including those embodied in both popular and high culture. But we cannot go beyond this to begin to create a socialist mass culture which will be a component in the ‘common sense’ of the mass of people until the bourgeoisie has been beaten in the economic and political struggle.

Let’s do what we can do with our meagre resources, and not make the mistake of embarking upon grandiose schemes that lead nowhere.

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